



A Tour of the Mouths of Château Rouge

It's Sunday, 27th of October, 2019 and I've just seen my breath for the first time this year. I do it again, this time pulling deeper into my lungs.

[...]

There it is, momentarily masking my vision. I look up. My eye caught by the opaque glow of the luminous green pharmacy sign. '7° C' it says, wrapped up in fog. Animating and transitioning '12:21' it says, mirroring the action. Symmetrically parked either side of a blinking colon. Inhale. Exhale. '12:21' I say aloud.

Disfigured bollards and Haussmannian building blocks flank either side of the cobbled street. Stepping left and right, slaloming between bystanders, market goers and the such like. The smell of fresh meat permeates across the street, I can almost taste it. The sounds of butchers grinding bones and fruit sellers in full song. The delivery men are calling for order and the discrete mutterings of back-street city hustlers continue. Sirens cry-out like whale song and an organ of car horns sound out from the congestion ahead. The line of vehicles harmonise momentarily, the driver nearest to me throws up his arms in dismay, and in turn looks somewhat like the composer of this almighty orchestra.

Cardboard boxes and empty fruit crates have been assembled and propped-up to form pedestals of exchange. The makeshift urban furnitures stand temporarily unoccupied and undecorated of goods. A sign that the police have only moments ago made their unannounced daily sweep of the unlicensed traders. I step off the curb, slipping between bumpers—a car pulls past up the one-way street, clearing out the disorder ahead—trailing behind catching the slipstream in its wake, I traverse up-street. Skipping the crowd who've briefly been washed-up onto the side-walk. Black bin bags sit aside front doors interrupting the pedestrians path like rotund full stops lodged in text.

The *bouches de lavage* gargles up from within and babbles out in public. From gut to gutter. Purling past the collected debris with the water racing downstream to the base of the street. Here on Chicken Street, the mouths are open all day, as is the market; full flow seven days a week. Positioned roadside at the top of the hill, the solid fixtures

integrated as part of the curb. Activated punctually using a steel 'T' shaped key, the Green Men call the mouthpieces into action between 06:00 and 07:00 a.m. Each of the men come equipped with oversized toothbrush, working their way down and around the surrounding streets, sweeping along, dislodging the accumulative daily junk. Today what's yet to be swept away is mostly the usual;

bottle tops
and cigarette butts

loose vegetables
and crushed fruit

smashed glass
and espresso cups

slashed cable ties
and deformed aluminium cans

unfastened African weaves
and expired metro tickets

steel coathanger hooks
carrier bags
and discarded betting slips

wedged under tyre
stuck under foot

over and
over and
over and
over

While the mouth spits and whispers during working hours, a small number of pigeons flutter their feathers in the guttural waters. Around 04:00 p.m the Green Men will return to mute the mouths and clean out the cavities of Chicken Street. I continue on and leave the *bouches de lavage* to rumble on.

Jostling my way through the crowd I head up to the main intersection between Rue Poulet and Barbès Boulevard. The *Bouche de métro* towers well above the crowd. Jaw ajar it makes itself known to the masses. 'Metro' it exclaims in reverberant red. Here where the traffic swells most, the current most dense. A brief opening in the onrushing crowd gives a glimpse into the functioning underbelly of the city. Metro lines run like arteries across the city, circulating streams of commuters to their desired destination. Escalators and automatic doors funnel the flow between space and place.

Following the road up and around, the *Bouche d'aération* lies behind another carelessly positioned bus stop, expelling an uninterrupted fume-filled torrent of smog. As the metros regurgitated air is pushed straight up and out onto the pavement, passing pedestrians form in single-file to keep the air at nose length.

“Trois cents bouches du métro rejettent des particules fines à des niveaux de danger exceptionnels”

“Three hundred mouths of the metro emit fine particles at exceptional levels of danger”

—Anne Hidalgo, 18 September, 2019

An article published in *Le Monde*, quotes the cities mayors call for the public to steer clear of the unfriendly mouths. For the large part people do indeed avoid walking across the grills. There are however the occasional exceptions; In a despairing effort to keep warm, night-time city dwellers can be found using the smoking mouths, erecting their tents during the winter months. In contrast, every so often you'll spot children dancing across them, amused by the rush of air inflating their clothes.

Turning right, looping back round towards Chicken Street I pass through Rue Doudeauville the *bouche d'égout* is busy swallowing up the water from the *bouches de lavage*. Setting aside the daily debris too big to consume. The draining mouth is one of the key mediators between waste, city and sea water. The water used by the Green Men comes from a separate supply line to the water we drink. Two water supply networks are used across the city; the first a treated potable water and a second untreated non-potable water. One we use to clean our teeth and another to clean our streets.